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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses linkages between play, healthy social and emotional development, and behavior management in young children. Play is defined as pleasurable, self-motivated, non-goal-directed, and spontaneous behavior, free from adult-imposed rules. Many children have limited time available for play because they are directed by adults in day care and after school programs, because they attend schools in which recess has been eliminated and physical education time reduced, or because they live in unsafe neighborhoods where they are not allowed to play in their own yards. Some studies suggest that a lack of play opportunities could be a cause of the gradual worsening in behavior problems and the increase in juvenile violence in the last 15 years. Psychologists such as Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner point to the importance of play for development. Studies suggest that play may meet children's psychological needs for belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Play may also contribute to the development of social skills, and it may reduce tension and anxiety. By providing time and materials for dramatic play, teachers can help children cope with stress and help them learn skills such as creativity, sequential memory, group cooperation, receptive vocabulary, impulse control, and perspective-taking. Play can also be used to teach problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. In addition to social skills, as children master physical skills in play, their self-esteem is enhanced, and they gain self-knowledge, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-expression. This paper suggests that teachers and child care providers become advocates for children's play. (Contains 24 references.) (KDFB)

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Play: An Important Component of Preventative Behavior Management

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Abstract

Play is an very important part of childhood. How play is related to healthy social and emotional development and thereby linked to behavior management is the focus of this paper. Definitions of play, research on the impact of play on social development, how and why children are deprived of play, how problem solving skills are developed through play, and the significance of motor development in relation to social and emotional growth are discussed. Evidence indicates many social skills are developed during play. Through play, children learn social rules such as turn taking, negotiating, and cooperating. Children develop self-esteem and cope with stress through their play. Giving children the time and freedom to play can be a critical component of preventative behavior management.

Play: An Important Component of Preventative Behavior Management

Books and articles on the importance of play in child development are numerous. Studies of child development link play to development in all domains: cognitive, social/emotional, physical, and language. Whether this information is being applied by teachers and other professionals working with children is in question. How play is related to healthy social and emotional development and thereby linked to behavior management is the focus of this discussion. Topics included are definitions of play, how children are deprived of opportunities for play, research on play, the relationship of play to social development, sociodramatic play, the relation of play to problem solving, and the significance of motor development in social and emotional growth.

Many children today go from home, to before-care, to school, and to after-care being continually directed by adults. In addition, many school districts have eliminated recess so there can be more "seat time." And physical education sadly, in too many cases has been reduced to once a week and frequently taught by people without training in physical education or play leadership.

Outside of school, playtime has also been diminished. Some children are rushed to music, dance, or karate class where they again are directed by adults.

Others go home to neighborhoods so unsafe that they are not even allowed to play in their own front yard. Summer means day care or camp where all too often most activities are again directed by adults. Evenings and weekends for too many children consist of television, video games, and other sedentary, non-play activities. Free play has become quite limited for many of today's children. This is quite a contrast when compared with children of only a few decades ago. Then, children could safely roam their neighborhoods making up games, climbing trees, and exploring wooded areas, creeks, and ponds.

Behavior Problem or Cultural Disease

Informal questioning of educators with 15 or more years in teaching indicates the general consensus seems to be that behavior problems have gradually worsened. Statistics show a rise in juvenile crime and in the incidence of childhood problems such as attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in the past two decades. According to Black (1992), 750,000 children receive Ritalin or Dexedrine (a similar drug) and it is predicted that number will reach over one million soon. Gazella (1994) states that sales of Ritalin have increased 33% over the past year. Millar (1993) argues that attention deficit disorder is overdiagnosed. He contends that if we believe the disorder is inherent in children we don't have to look at poor parenting skills, poor classroom management, and boring or inappropriate curriculum development. In contrast, children in other

countries are rarely prescribed drugs for hyperactivity (Black, 1992). Is the prevalence of ADHD in this country a symptom of the gradual removal of fun or play time from children? Are adults taking play out of children's lives? These are questions that could be related to the increase in ADHD and are worth looking into.

Rivkin (1995) proposes that it is possible that hyperactivity could be in part, a cultural disease. She suggests that confining children for too long may produce the disruptive activity levels adults find difficult to tolerate. Rivkin links lack of play to behavior problems in quoting Anita Olds, "Indeed, it is likely that restrictions placed on learning environments (homes, schools, playgrounds) that limit opportunities for movement and active engagement contribute substantially to, if not actually cause, many so-called behavioral and learning difficulties." (Rivkin, 1994, p. 5).

Lack of play could be the cause for many problem behaviors in children. There seems to be a link between behavior problems and a lack of what should be a basic right of children, the right to play. The right to play was included in the 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child. In 1992 this declaration was signed by 123 countries (USA not included) at the Convention on the Rights of the Child at the World Summit for Children. Those countries signed to ratify it's intent and make it legally binding. This right is based on the belief that children develop

physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually through play (Guddemi, & Jambor, 1993).

Defining Play

There are many definitions of play. Frost and Jacobs (1995) describe play as being pleasurable, self-motivated, non-goal directed, spontaneous, and free from adult imposed rules. Play is active and hands-on. Activities that are controlled by adults or machines such as television or video games are non-play. Play is individual and open-minded. It is all-consuming, joyous, and captivating. It is not competitive or directed. Through play children learn about their world and their relationship to it. They learn about their inner self and create their self-image (Davidson & Quinn 1993). Play is concerned with process not product.

Children Are Being Deprived of Play

Many experts acknowledge children are being deprived of play. Guddemi & Jambor (1993) discuss four factors that are eroding children's play opportunities. They are poverty, changing cultural values, inadequate space to play, and over emphasis on work and under emphasis on play in elementary and preschools. Frost and Jacobs (1995) suggest that play deprivation is a factor in juvenile violence. They list several factors that are taking away children's freedom to play. 1. Children's lives are controlled by adult's schedules from daylight to dark leaving no time for free play. 2. Public parks and school

playgrounds are ill-equipped and even hazardous. Much of the equipment is developmentally inappropriate. 3. Recess has been shortened or eliminated in many schools. There is a lack of trained adult guidance during this limited recess. 4. With rising crime rates, parents are afraid to let children out of the house. 5. Most cities are not planned with play spaces for children in mind.

The technological advances of this century have also severely altered or destroyed habitats for children. Roads and automobiles create dangerous barriers to play and exploration in neighborhoods. Lack of effective environmental protection has polluted creeks, streams, lakes, ponds, and beaches that were once healthy places to play. Statistics indicate that the negative affects of this pollution disproportionately affect low-income and minority children (Rivkin, 1995).

The effects of an unclean, unsafe environment on self-esteem and self worth may be difficult to measure, but it is hard to imagine self-esteem not being negatively impacted. And, of course, lack of self-esteem is often an indicator of behavior problems or lack of social skills.

Research on the Importance of Play

There is a large volume of research supporting the importance of play in the development of the whole child. William Glasser (1986) rejects the classic stimulus-response view of behavior. He argues that the basic premise is wrong and that our actions are due to our attempts to satisfy several basic needs rather

than the stimulus-response theory of acting due to outside forces. Glasser says behavior is attempts to satisfy the physiological needs of staying alive and reproducing, and the psychological needs of belonging (or being loved), power, freedom, and fun. He contends that unless these needs are being met elsewhere, students will attempt to satisfy them at school. For example, the need to have fun when thwarted, may manifest itself in a child "acting out" in class

Linder (1993) also discusses the short-comings of a behaviorist approach when working with young children in a therapeutic setting. She contends that skills learned in a highly structured setting do not necessarily transfer to other settings. In her book Transdisciplinary Play-based Assessment, Linder provides suggestions and guidelines for incorporating play as a part of a program to build skills in all the developmental areas.

Glasser (1986) also remarks on the 1984 recommendations from the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled A Nation At Risk. One of the recommendations is to work students harder with a longer school day and year, harder courses, and more homework. Glasser contends that this philosophy will simply push students whose needs are not being met further away. He likens this to tinkering with piston driven aircraft to get more speed when what is needed is a new type of structure - a jet engine. He suggests a major change in the way we teach is needed. This change, central to Glasser`s theory, is

a move to cooperative learning. He goes into detail as to how the four basic psychological needs belonging, power, freedom, and fun can be met with this type of peer interactive, team learning.

Simply being outdoors can provide a sense of freedom. Rivkin (1995) discusses the importance of being outdoors for children:

> Given that most of our evolution as a species occurred in the outdoors, children surely need to experience being outside. In particular, they may require being in an outdoor environment with living things. The sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson is among those who hypothesize "a human need, fired in the crucible of evolutionary development, for deep and intimate association with the natural environment, particularly its living biota. Not only does nature supply us with material needs, but also aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual meaning and satisfaction." If we hold Wilson's biophilia hypothesis against the closed environments of our schools, houses, and cars and reflect on how new in history they are, our way of life seems truly an experiment. (p. 6)

Glasser (1986) has much to say about play. If there is no fun, children will attempt to play at inappropriate times. Boring is the opposite of fun. Play can

balance much misery, is usually spontaneous, makes anything we do better and worth doing again, and is an incentive to keep going day to day.

When reminiscing on their own school days adults often remember the "fun" parts most clearly. The learning that stayed is the learning derived from exciting and fun activities such as field trips, class plays, and group projects. Even as adults we find value in play. Adults in satisfying jobs often describe their work as fun.

Teachers trained in early childhood education are certainly aware of the importance of play in the development of the whole child. Although it does not seem to be written anywhere, educational practices today often put an end to fun and freedom as soon as the child enters first grade. Sadly, this rigid curriculum is even pushed down to kindergarten and preschool by teachers with the intention of getting children "ready for school".

The theories of Lev Vygotsky also point to the importance of play in regards to both social and cognitive development. Play helps children cope with frustration. Play has it's origins in emotions. It is invented by the toddler to cope with unrealized desires (Scarlett, 1993). Vygotsky talks about a "zone of proximal development". In this zone, skills that have not quite emerged can be nudged along as the child plays with a slightly more sophisticated peer or adult. By responding to the child's pretending and following his lead, the teacher or

parent can help the child gain important cognitive and social skills (Gowen, 1995).

Jerome Bruner said that playful interactions in early childhood may well lead to problem solving abilities in later life (Wassermann, 1992). Play builds confidence in dealing with the environment. It gives the child courage to think, talk, and be himself (Landreth, 1993). Jean Piaget also studied the importance of play. He said that children should be allowed to experiment and find answers for themselves. The ability for the child to persist in experimenting relies on being playful. Piaget believed that young children only truly understand what they construct themselves (Erikson, 1976).

These researchers certainly point to the importance of hands on learning and giving children opportunities to explore, self-discover or play. Are children being turned away from the joy of learning in the early years by centering teaching on lecturing, seat work, paper and pencil tasks, rote memorization, isolated skills acquisition, drills, and standardized testing? Does this type of teaching create frustration that becomes bad attitudes and bad behavior? Negative attitudes towards school begin to appear as early as first or second grade. Children whose play needs are consistently being met at home may be able to overcome the lack of satisfaction in the school day. But due to lack of time and freedom for play, many children are not having these needs met at home

or school. Solutions to the problem such as working children harder and extending the school day and year ignore the volumes of research on child development done over the past 40 years. Teachers, administrators, school boards, text book publishers and teacher educators must share the responsibility of making changes consistent with research.

Play and Social Development

Much has been written on the importance of play in social development. Play enhances social skills. Social skills are generally lacking in children with behavior problems. Play provides healing for hurts and sadness while breaking down tension and anxiety. Play releases pent up urges and allows for self expression. Children can play act out inner feelings of fear, anger, or loss. Play is an important stress reliever. Even children going through trying conditions can experience the pleasure of playing. When the urge to play is thwarted, the joyful path of development and self-discovery is hampered. The child's personality unfolds through the process of play. Through play, children learn to express personal views and understand other's views. They learn about justice, fairness, cooperation, friendship, loyalty, and social rules. As these social skills develop so does self-esteem (Frost & Jacobs 1995).

Just as stress is a factor in adult life, it is also a factor in children's lives. Adults have an advantage due to the ability to understand how to put time and

consequences in perspective. Children often have little control over what is going on in their lives. Play gives children a sense of control. This sense of control is essential to emotional development and mental health (Landreth, 1993). Although adults can understand what is causing the stress, children often can't. The way children cope with stress is through their play (Fite & Beck, 1993). Deprived of a play outlet, children cope with stress through misbehavior. Creative free play has therapeutic power for children. Play is a way for them to escape the pressures of the adult world. It can give children a sense of control over traumatic experiences (Frost, 1995).

Sociodramatic Play

Teachers of young children can help them cope with stress and learn social skills needed to be successful in school by enhancing play opportunities. One way to do that is to provide many and varied materials for dramatic play. Sociodramatic plays lead to both cognitive and social development. Dramatic play gives children the opportunity to imitate or role play. They make believe with objects, actions, and situations. Persistence in role, social interaction, and verbal communication are elements of dramatic play that develop skills (Steffey, 1993). Sociodramatic play contains both an element of reality (the child imitates real life scenes previously observed) and an element of make-believe or fantasy (the child selects roles to play). Early sociodramatic play begins between 2 and 3

years of age. It peaks at ages 4 to 6 and begins to fade after age 7. Early childhood educators should certainly take advantage of this window of opportunity by providing time and materials for dramatic play. This type of play is an avenue for learning important pro-social values such as honesty, service, loyalty, and truthfulness. Children learn how to gain entrance to a group, how to negotiate, to be a leader or deal with a leader, and how to get along with people you don't agree with (Hatcher, Nicosia, & Pape, 1993). Clearly, these important skills translate to success in upper grades and in adult life. Glasser's theory of putting secondary students in learning teams could be looked at as an extension of this type of early childhood activity.

Gowen (1995) discusses a wide variety of skills that research has shown to be developed by symbolic play. These include creativity, sequential memory, group cooperation, receptive vocabulary, impulse control, and perspective taking skills (spatial, affective, and cognitive). The acquisition of these skills is enhanced when an adult or older peer plays along following the child's lead and gently extending the play theme.

Early childhood teachers can support sociodramatic play in several ways. First, teachers need to understand the importance of this form of play and provide long enough time slots in the daily schedule for children to thoroughly set up and explore a play theme. The time children spend deciding what to play, who plays

which role, and what materials to use is time spent practicing social skills. Some researchers give the minimum time for self-directed play as 45 minutes (Nunnelley, 1994). Others give 30 minutes as a minimum. In these longer play periods children engage in more group play, cooperative play, and constructive play. In their study, Christie and Wardle (1992) found that during short play periods children were involved in less mature play such as onlooking, unoccupied, functional, and parallel play. They also found both the amount of social play and the maturity of play is positively affected by teachers giving ample time for play.

Providing Materials for Dramatic Play

Another way to facilitate dramatic play is to provide an abundance of materials. Jones and Reynolds (1992) use the term "loose parts". This can mean anything from recycled margarine tubs for making mud cakes on the playground to toy vehicles to dress-up clothes. Loose parts present variables in the child's environment. The more variables there are, the more children are able to be inventive. The possibilities for discovery and problem solving go up with more loose parts or variables. Prop boxes are also very useful in helping children expand on a theme. A prop box is organized around a theme that is relevant to the child's life. For example a restaurant box might contain play dishes and food, boxes from fast food and pizza franchises, apron, chef hat, notepads, pens, menus,

etc. The objects should be appealing, attractive, and non-sexist. Labeling and having both indoor and outdoor boxes are also helpful (Hatcher, Nicosia & Pate, 1993).

The Relation of Play to Problem Solving

Another aspect of play that can be addressed with respect to behavior management is the role of play in problem solving. In studies of both humans and animals it has been found that play behaviors are borrowed from non-play sequences such as pretending to fight or pretending to prepare food. In this manner, play serves as a sort of rehearsal for life. Play prepares the individual to solve problems in an organized and flexible way. Play also gives the child opportunities to experiment with objects in unusual ways. In experiments with chimpanzees it was shown that prior experience with manipulating and playing with sticks and clamps led to being able to later solve a problem that required putting them together to get a banana out of reach. Lack of experience or no prior play with the sticks and clamps was associated with failure in the chimps (Sylva, Bruner, & Genaova, 1976).

Similar experiments were done with children, with the results showing that children who had played with sticks and hooks prior to being presented with a problem (of something out of reach), were more enthusiastic, productive, and organized than children who were given direct instructions in using the materials.

The playing children began with simple solutions and then progressed to more difficult ones. The non-playing children did not experiment. The researchers drew the following conclusion: Playing with objects beforehand seems to result in better problem solving. This improvement was due to 3 factors. 1. Solving problems require self-initiation. In this experiment, playing children were the only ones who's actions were self-initiated. 2. Tool invention requires serial ordering. The playing children had opportunities to experiment with putting the objects in different orders. 3. Play reduced the stress of anticipating success or failure (Sylva, Bruner, & Genaova, 1976).

Conflict-resolution skills can be taught to young children when teachers are ready and willing to interact with them during their play. Dinwiddie (1994) says that teaching young children to cooperatively negotiate with each other is a win - win situation. She calls it "social problem solving" when it is used with young children and gives two reasons why it is important. First, as children play there are continual conflicts over territory, property, and privileges. Second, early attitudes and skills are developing in these formative years that will be the foundation for later problem solving. As we teach children to generate their own solutions they are practicing language skills and divergent thinking skills. Playtime offers many opportunities to practice these skills.

Many important social skills are practiced and developed due to the child's desire to keep the play going. These social skills include observing and responding to others, accepting others ideas, taking turns, negotiating, and other cooperation skills (Rivkin, 1995).

The Significance of Motor Development

Another aspect of play that bears investigation is the benefits of physical movement. The significance of motor development in young children's self-esteem is obvious to any parent or teacher. We see the pride on a child's face as she shouts "Watch me!" and then runs, climbs, swings, jumps with glee. Self-confidence (an important component of positive self-image) has it's roots in motor development. The first self a child knows is his motor self. As the child climbs from the crib, he moves in the direction of self-respect and self-confidence. As physical skills are mastered (somersaults, biking, swimming) there is an outward display of pleasure. This good feeling is internalized and leads to the ability to freshly attack other problems. This feeling of renewed self-confidence allows a person of any age to take up a new challenge (Omwake, 1971). Children in schools with limited recess may have very little access to this wonderful feeling. Swinging hand to hand across the monkey bars takes a lot of practice!

Whitehurst (1971) looked at movement from the child's perspective. After long periods of observing children and talking to children, Whitehurst made a list of what movement means to a child. First, movement means life; or the child attributes life to movement. An example that comes to mind is a child interacting with a puppet as if it is alive. Second, movement is an important factor in self-discovery, independence, and pride. Movement is how the child discovers the environment both physical and social. Movement means freedom to the child. Freedom from confinement and freedom for self-expression. Movement means safety or the ability to avoid harm. Movement is a basic method of communicating and establishing contact with others. Movement is enjoyment and sensuous pleasure for a child. Children jump for joy. They run for the sheer joy of it. And finally, being able to control one's movement builds a positive self-image and gives the child a feeling of being accepted. Impaired motor functioning often results in emotional problems as well. Whitehurst concludes by saying, "If movement means so much to the developing child, no further justification should be required for its inclusion among the major techniques in education" (Whitehurst, 1971,). Movement as a major educational technique is not being implemented in most schools today. If anything, movement seems to be frowned upon in many classrooms. Physical education

teachers are the first to go when budgets are being cut. Seat time connotes learning time.

Advocating For Play

It is time to reflect on how we deprive children of movement, fun, and play. Although it is more apparent in young children, the need for play is true for children of all ages -- including grown-ups. Play is a component necessary for all of us to develop our full potentials. The role of play in the development of social skills and self-esteem seems clear.

Teachers and child care providers can help move schools in a more child and play oriented direction. The first step is to be informed. There is much research and many publications on the importance of play in child development. USA / IPA American Association for the Child's Right to Play is an organization formed to disseminate information on the importance of play (address: Nancy Eletto, 616 Kimbark St., Longmont, CO 80501). Second, become an advocate for play. Talk to colleagues and administrators about the importance of play. Use the outdoors as an extension of your classroom activities. View it as teaching time rather than teacher break time. (Talk to administrators about incorporating a teacher breaks elsewhere in the daily schedule.) Avoid taking away outside time as a punishment for misbehavior. Find out about parks and play spaces in your community. Advocate for improvements where needed. Third, observe children

playing and recall your own childhood in respect to the joyful, free feeling of playing outside. Avoid stifling the important opportunities for growth and development that play is.

There are educational trends being embraced now that seem to be supportive of the child's right to play. The move to whole language instruction, integrated curriculum, hands on math and science, active learning, and team learning are all examples of bringing freedom, fun, and creativity to learning. It would be wonderful if good teaching were judged by the amount of time children spend joyously and actively learning rather than the amount of time they spend sitting still in their seats. Although making play an integral part of the curriculum in schools may not cure all classroom management problems, giving children the time and freedom to play can be an important component of preventative behavior management.

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